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30 April 1953

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

SUBJECT: Current Developments in Laos

This is a most helpful statement

1. The military situation in Laos. During the period October-December 1952, Viet Minh forces captured all French Union outposts in the mountainous Thai country of northwestern Tonkin except Nasan, Laichau, and Dien Bien Phu, and conducted reconnaissance operations across the border in northern Laos. Expecting the Viet Minh to renew their attacks on Nasan and northern Laos during the good weather period of April and May 1953, the French Command continued during the January-March respite to build up the defenses of Nasan and to fortify the area of Sam Neua, a town astride a terrain corridor from Tonkin into northern Laos. During March it became apparent to the French Command that the Viet Minh were preparing to strike again, and the French expressed confidence in their ability to hold Nasan and to stop an attack into northern Laos.

Alfred
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DCI
COMMENT

2. On 14 April the Viet Minh resumed the offensive and drove into Laos with an estimated strength of 21 battalions supported by large numbers of coolie supply porters. In the initial attack, one column of 9 battalions quickly routed the French Union garrison at Sam Neua and moved southwestward toward the Plain des Jarres; another column of 9 battalions moved inland from the Annam coast and quickly reached the French Union position on the Plain des Jarres; a third column of 3 battalions moved southward along the valley of the Mou River toward Luang Prabang. At the present time the exact location and movement of Viet Minh units in Laos is obscure, but the immediate tactical objective appears to be the early capture of Luang Prabang and possibly the administrative capital of Vientiane.

3. In meeting this threat, the French theoretically could: (a) bring up reserves from the Delta and from south and central Vietnam to defend Luang Prabang and reinforce such strong points as the Plain des Jarres, and/or (b) attack the seriously overextended and vulnerable Viet Minh lines of communication by striking in force from the Delta. The French

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have decided on the former. It is still too early to estimate whether they will be able to move sufficient reinforcements to prevent the capture of Luang Prabang and Vientiane. Meanwhile, the consequent dispersion of French strength from the Delta, while not so great as to endanger French ability to resist large-scale Viet Minh attacks, makes it extremely doubtful that the French could launch a successful attack from the Delta against the Viet Minh lines of communication which extend from Laos through Tonkin to the China border. It would therefore appear that the Viet Minh will be able to retain the military initiative in Laos even if they do not succeed in early capture of Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

4. Probable future trends in Indochina. The long-range implications of the Laos campaign are more serious. It would appear that the Viet Minh have realized the futility of assaulting the more heavily armed French Union forces in the Tonkin Delta and at other strong points. The Laos campaign would fit into an over-all strategy of seizing the military initiative by attacking lightly defended portions of Indochina while postponing and avoiding a final test of arms with the principal French Union forces. This tactic would also have the result of forcing the French to disperse their forces more widely, thus preventing them from building up sufficient strength in strategic Tonkin to assume the offensive.

5. The French are not now in a position to take the military initiative away from the Viet Minh. The reduction of French Union strength in the Tonkin Delta will seriously reduce French ability to clean out the Viet Minh guerrillas infesting the Delta, and will postpone still further the time when French Union build-up will be great enough to support an offensive. Diversion of units from south Vietnam has forced postponement of plans to sweep that area of guerrillas this year. Moreover, Vietnamese morale may decline, causing an increase in "fence sitting" and much greater difficulty in recruiting to meet projected expansion goals of the Vietnamese Army. Therefore, unless and until the French Union increases its total armed strength, concentrates its available strength, and adopts more aggressive military and political courses of action, the Viet Minh can be expected to retain the initiative and move gradually to the consolidation of its control over Laos, Cambodia, and the lightly defended portions of Vietnam.

6. The threat to Thailand. We do not believe that the attack on Laos was undertaken with the primary purpose of

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preparing for an invasion or infiltration of Thailand. It is certain, however, that a Viet Minh occupation of Laos will provide opportunities for Communist organizational activities among the 40-50,000 Vietnamese who inhabit northeastern Thailand, and for exerting psychological pressures on the Thai government. In time, a serious guerrilla movement might be developed among the Vietnamese in Thailand on the basis of supplies and leadership provided by the Viet Minh. The threat to the stability of Thailand would be further increased if the Viet Minh were not stalemated in Laos and were permitted to move southward along the Mekong River and the Thai border to Cambodia.

7. Because of the establishment of a Thai autonomous area in southern Yunnan Province in Communist China, there has also been speculation that the drive into Laos might be part of a Communist plan to establish a "free Thai Republic" encompassing the Thai peoples of Laos, Thailand, and the Shan States of Burma. It should be noted, however, that the establishment of a Thai autonomous area in southern Yunnan was only one act in the Chinese Communist program for setting up autonomous areas throughout China where large groups of racial minorities are concentrated. Moreover, it is doubtful whether the appeal of a "greater" Thai republic would prove effective in Laos, the Shan States, or in Thailand. The use of the fiction of a "free Thai" movement, in one form or another, particularly as a device to cover a Chinese Communist and Viet Minh supported guerrilla movement in Thailand, must be considered a future possibility, however.

8. Relation of the Laos invasion to current Soviet tactics. In the recent Soviet statement made in reply to President Eisenhower's speech of 16 April, the Soviet leaders appear to disclaim any responsibility for or control over the "national-liberation" movements of Southeast Asia. We believe, however, that the Viet Minh is responsive to guidance and direction from Peiping and Moscow, and that if Moscow had felt that the crossing of the borders of the Kingdom of Laos by Vietnamese communists would prejudice seriously Soviet global interests, the USSR could have brought about a postponement of the long-planned military operation.

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Acting Assistant Director
National Estimates

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